DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 653 EC 306 759

AUTHOR	McLaughlin, Margaret J.; Henderson, Kelly; Rhim, Lauren M.
TITLE	Snapshots of Reform: How Five Local Districts Are Interpreting Standards-Based Reform for Students with Disabilities.
INSTITUTION	Center for Policy Research on the Impact of General and Special Education Reform, Alexandria, VA.
SPONS AGENCY	Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1998-09-00
NOTE	23p.
CONTRACT	H023H40002
AVAILABLE FROM	Center for Policy Research on the Impact of General and Special Education Reform, 1012 Cameron Street, Alexandria, VA 22314; Tel: 703-684-4000 ($7.50 plus $2 shipping and handling).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Standards; Accountability; Case Studies; Decision Making; *Disabilities; Educational Assessment; Educational Change; Educational Environment; *Educational Innovation; Elementary Secondary Education; Family Involvement; Inservice Teacher Education; Professional Development; *Regular and Special Education Relationship; School Districts; *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	Academic Accommodations (Disabilities); Testing Accommodations (Disabilities)

ABSTRACT

This monograph has been developed as part of an intensive, 3-year study of five local school districts engaged in general and special education reform. The purpose of the study was to examine how educational reforms were being defined and implemented at the local district and school levels, particularly with students with disabilities. The investigated reforms included standards, assessments and accountability, family and community involvement, and teacher development. This publication describes the key elements of reform that emerged during the study and issues surrounding educational reform. Section 2 presents a context in which to understand the district reforms. Sections 3-5 present specific findings related to each area. The final section presents conclusions. Findings from the study indicate: (1) there needs to be a consistent decision-making process outlining who should make decisions about how to include students with disabilities in standards and assessments; (2) there need to be consistent guidelines with teacher and family input for making these decisions and for public accountability for these decisions; and (3) teachers of students with disabilities must be made aware of the essential connection between standards, assessment, and accountability and the daily content and structure of their instruction. (CR)

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September 1998

The Center for Policy Research on the Impact of General and Special Education Reform

EC 306759

SNAPSHOTS OF REFORM:

HOW FIVE LOCAL DISTRICTS ARE INTERPRETING STANDARDS-BASED REFORM FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Margaret J. McLaughlin, Kelly Henderson, Lauren M. Rhim

September 1998

The Center for Policy Research on the Impact of General and Special Education Reform

This research and monograph were made possible by a cooperative agreement with the Office of Special Education Programs, United States Department of Education, grant #H023H40002. The contents of this monograph are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Department of Education.

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In October 1994, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) established a Center for Policy Research on the Impact of General and Special Education Reform (the Center) to study the interaction between current general and special education policies and their impact on students with disabilities. The Center is a joint endeavor of the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), the Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth at the University of Maryland (UM), and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) at the University of Pennsylvania, and is housed at NASBE.

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- **What Will It Take? Standards-Based Education Reform for ALL Students.** This report raises important questions about whether recent efforts to improve the education system will, in fact, raise educational achievement for all the diverse populations of children in schools. A clear explanation of the nature of education reform, how it is being carried out in the states, and the involvement of the special education community in this work, are included. (October 1996, 30+ pp., $10.00)

- **Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities.** This Issue Brief begins by defining charter schools and looking at how charter schools in various states handle the education of students with disabilities. It then focuses on the state of Colorado and examines general education issues as well as trends, problems and approaches to special education found in the state's charter schools. (September 1996, 20 pp., $7.50)

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Snapshots of Reform:

How Five Local Districts Are Interpreting Standards-Based Reform for Students with Disabilities

1. Introduction

This publication has been developed as part of an intensive, three-year study of five local school districts engaged in general and special education reform. The purpose of the study was to examine how educational reforms were being defined and implemented at the local district and school levels, particularly with students with disabilities. The reforms investigated included standards, assessments and accountability, family and community involvement, and teacher development. Each case study described what policies, programs, or initiatives the district was implementing and analyzed how teachers, parents, and administrators perceived these reforms to be impacting students with disabilities.

This monograph is based on a more comprehensive report on that study which analyzed the implementation of reforms in each of the sites.[1]

We chose the five districts because they represent a diverse cross section in terms of size, economics, geographic location, and degree of state versus local control. The districts (identified here with fictitious names) include a large urban system with a predominantly minority student population (Bannister); two suburban systems—a small independent district (Watertown) and a large county-wide district (Doyle County); and two rural districts—an independent town (Morgan River) and a county-wide system (Hanley County). (See chart on page 4.)

We obtained case study information for each district through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations conducted during visits to the districts. In each district, we interviewed central office administrators, building principals and assistant principals, special education supervisors/coordinators, teachers and other staff, and parents. We visited a minimum of three elementary, one middle, and one high school in each district to observe classrooms.

We also reviewed documents that pertained to district demographics, funding, development of new standards and assessment instruments, special education programs, governance, and other reform initiatives. Examples of these documents include community newspapers, state legislation or regulations, district mission and goal statements, curricula, assessments, general policies and procedures, special education procedures, individual school improvement plans, and staff development agendas and promotion requirements.

This monograph will describe the key elements of reform that emerged during the study and will then present an overview of some of the general issues that emerged surrounding the climate in which reforms are

[1] The comprehensive research report is titled *Snapshots of Reform: Synthesis of Findings Across 5 Case Studies*, by M.J. McLaughlin, K. Henderson, and I.M. Rhim. It was completed in 1997 by the Center for Policy Research on the Impact of General and Special Education Reform, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland.

being implemented. Section II presents a context in which to understand the district reforms. Sections III-V present specific findings or themes related to each area. Section VI presents conclusions.

Defining Reform

Education reform can mean different things to different people. However, for this study of local district reform we looked at a common core of initiatives, including the issues that follow.

Curricular Change and Setting Content and Performance Standards

At the core of reform are the new standards for what students need to know and be able to do. These are "content" standards that define the subject matter, including specific skills and competencies considered important for students to learn, and "performance" standards that define the expected level of learning for students at different grade levels.

Assessment and Accountability

Reform entails using new forms of assessment and an increased emphasis on accountability. Assessment reforms include increasing the number and type of tests used by states and districts for measuring student performance. Included among these assessments are those that emphasize ability to solve problems or apply new knowledge and skills in more authentic ways. Performance assessments such as writing samples, demonstrations, and portfolios are being used more frequently.

Accountability reforms focus on schools or school systems and include public reporting of student test scores, increased standards for school or district accreditation, and the use of sanctions and/or rewards based on student performance or assessments. Increased student accountability typically means increasing course requirements and linking test scores to high school graduation and grade promotion.

Governance

These reforms include site-based management as well as charter schools and other choice options. A chief goal of these reforms is to increase local school autonomy and flexibility.

Each of the case studies describes a district's reforms and examines how the district is implementing them, how students with disabilities are participating in the reforms, and how special education programs are interacting with the various initiatives. The findings from across the five case studies are presented in Sections III - VI. However, we also identified several themes related to the overall content of reform. The next section presents these general observations about how reforms originate and conditions that are affecting their implementation.

District Name and Type	
Bannister	**Large Urban District**
Doyle County	**Large, County-wide Suburban District**
Watertown	**Small, Independent Suburban District**
Morgan River	**Independent, Small-town District**
Hanley County	**Rural, County-wide District**

II. The Context of Reform

While our study focused primarily on understanding how students with disabilities were participating in the key reforms of standards, assessments, accountability and governance, other issues emerged that are important to understanding the implementation of reform. Not surprisingly, all five districts were challenged by one or more factors such as high growth, changing demographics, flattened education funding, and both external and internal forces demanding change (e.g., state mandated reform "packages," new superintendents, community demand for higher student achievement, and new professional knowledge and research). All of these factors facilitated or constrained a district's ability to move a change agenda forward. Each of the districts and schools we studied was complex and multifaceted. There were many programs in place or under consideration, and professional development agendas contained a diverse range of topics. Everyone interviewed spoke of challenges facing their school or district as if the challenges were unique. Yet the following common questions and issues emerged across the districts.

Major Findings:

Defining Reform
Student Diversity
Reform Overload
Lack of Money
The Challenge of "Common" Standards

"Whose Ideas Are These?"

Each of the five districts was trying to implement both state and local reform initiatives. For example, the suburban district Doyle County was developing its standards and assessments while new state standards were being introduced and new state assessments were piloted. Both urban Bannister and rural Hanley County were implementing major state reforms with new standards and "high-stakes" assessments. Accountability reforms were both state and locally initiated, but all schools and districts were strongly influenced by the national movement to promote higher levels of achievement of more challenging subject matter. In all five districts, the new standards for what students should learn were also accompanied by new assessments, the results of which were used to hold students, schools, and/or systems accountable to the public. Regardless of whether the reforms were state or locally defined, teachers considered them to be externally imposed on the schools and, in many cases, politically motivated.

The standards and their implementation strategies reflected the usual variations one would expect across states and local school districts. Yet, in many ways the standards were remarkably similar. And whether they were state defined or locally developed, or accompanied by high stakes assessments, content and performance standards have been moving into classrooms and reshaping how and what teachers teach.

The assessments and enhanced accountability systems signal increased public scrutiny of schooling and also heighten anxiety among principals and teachers—and increasingly among parents.

The process of implementing standards, assessments, and enhanced accountability is complex and intensely political. All districts engaged in extensive discussion and dialogue within their communities and met some resistance from parents, school staff, and others. Increased accountability was most often noted by staff as a politically motivated imposition on schools. A few parents and teachers also questioned the new content demands implicit in the standards. School staff often believed they were doing the best they could with their students and that politicians "just didn't understand." Achieving "buy in" from teachers and principals was a major concern among administrators at the district level.

In contrast to standards, assessments, and accountability, governance changes were almost uniformly locally defined. With the exception of Hanley County, which is operating under sweeping state reform legislation, all of the other districts had great local discretion in how they chose to govern their schools. Even Hanley County had implemented site-based management years before the state requirement. The demand for greater community involvement was evident in state-level requirements for "school improvement teams" or "building accountability councils" that require parents and other community members to participate in some school-level decisions. The degree of local school autonomy and authority varied across districts and depended on how the district defined "site-based management." Local school governance changes in three of the five districts had been made almost unilaterally by the superintendent before any of the other reforms. They were implemented without great input or discussion among school staff or the community.

"Students Are Different Today!"

A common refrain among principals and teachers was that the students in the schools were very different from those of earlier generations. These differences go beyond race, cultural composition, or family economics and were attributed to more than demographic changes in the districts. In solidly middle class schools with very homogeneous populations, teachers repeatedly spoke of how difficult it was to reach students. All schools were challenged by discipline issues. Although the severity of the problems might differ across schools and districts, at least several teachers in each district cited problems with motivation, students lacking responsibility and not following directions, and parents who were too busy to focus on their child or provide needed structure. Teachers in Watertown and Doyle County attributed these problems to the rise in families with two working parents. Other teachers cited more pervasive cultural or societal changes.

"There's So Much Going On Out There. We're Reform Weary!"

As schools and school districts worked to implement specific reform initiatives, they faced competition for resources from numerous other programs or projects. The fact that curricular changes required by newly developed standards and assessments require deep changes in how teachers teach and organize instruction complicates the implementation process. In contrast, principals and teachers reported being drawn to simple, straightforward projects or interventions. Teachers wanted clarity and direction. The fact that in some districts the implementation of standards and assessments had been stalled or redefined due to political changes was difficult for some teachers who had to stop and restart curricular reform efforts. Further complicating implementation was the fact that many of the standards were global or generic statements and lacked the level of detail necessary for successful implementation.

Curricular "alignment," or specifying grade level curricular goals and performance targets, and discussion of how instruction might have to change in order for students to meet new standards was time consuming and sometimes confusing. As one elementary teacher said, "I need a road map; tell us exactly where we're supposed to be and I will go there."

Principals and teachers were very susceptible to "research entrepreneurs" who advocated a particular program or technique. While some of these programs were backed by research, neither teachers nor principals evaluated them in terms of how they supported the new standards. Teachers often brought back new models or practices from conferences or workshops. These often had a regional flavor, as the same program or consultant tended to show up in districts or schools in a few states that were close to one another. Often these new programs or ideas—such as conflict resolution, alternative high schools, multiple intelligences, and co-teaching—met a perceived need in a classroom or school or appealed to a particular teacher or principal.

Further contributing to expansion of programs were expectations for principals. In at least one of the districts, principals were explicitly evaluated on how well they developed "community partnerships" and brought in outside grants or programs. The established ethos was, "More is better." In other districts,

local school autonomy and control over instruction created through site-based management contributed to the expansion of individual projects or initiatives, which further contributed to the fragmentation of the curriculum and resources for professional development.

All of these efforts competed with state or district "standards-based" reforms for the attention of teachers. They also consumed significant portions of the most critical resource in the district: teacher time. As these many different programs emerged and competed with externally imposed standards and assessments, there was often a sense of weariness and wariness. "Let's wait and see if this is what we really have to do before we invest too much effort."

"Where Will the Money Come From?"

All of the districts were confronted with how to find resources to implement new standards and assessments. While some new money was available in each of the five districts to support reform efforts, most schools were faced with having to redirect existing resources. But discretion over many of the resources was often at the school level. For example, some elementary schools devoted their entire professional development budget as well as teacher release time to revising the curriculum in a particular area. However, other schools in the same district supported a menu of professional development topics chosen by teachers, which diluted resources and were not necessarily in line with curricular reforms. Thus, there were few new resources and somewhat haphazard redirection of existing resources.

"How Can They Expect Us to Have All Students Meet These Standards?"

Perhaps the most striking yet subtle issue to emerge from our study was how "powerless" teachers and, to some extent, principals felt about many of the reform initiatives. In Bannister, which was implementing comprehensive state reforms, there was a sense of being victimized, of being asked to do the impossible. Perhaps because of the sanctions imposed on schools that were not meeting performance goals, school staff often cited all of the reasons that schools could not meet the standards—usually summed up by the demographics of the student population. But this attitude was not unique to schools in low income areas. Some school staff in the suburban, largely middle class districts of Doyle County and Watertown talked about how their school should be held to different standards because they enrolled "those kids" from "the apartments," as staff in one Watertown school noted. As a Doyle County administrator commented, "Some principals try to walk away from accountability from certain students," noting that one district principal said his test scores should be adjusted because his students came from those "starter homes."

When individual teachers and administrators helped to develop standards and/or assessments within their own district, they expressed a somewhat greater sense of optimism about the value of those standards, and anticipated improvements in student learning. Teachers who worked together to align their instructional programs with standards or collaborated on adapting or modifying curricular standards for students with disabilities appeared more connected and committed to the process. Nonetheless, the concept of common standards or one-size-fits-all expectations troubled all schools.

Having a sense of control over how a reform is defined and implemented, through helping develop or score assessments or aligning curriculum, was important to teachers. It was important regardless of whether the reforms were state mandates or locally developed. There were differences across districts and schools in how autonomous a school staff considered itself, as well as the level of staff energy for change. Staff members' confidence in their ability to implement new curricula, assessments, or other reforms was also noticable in three of the districts. This confidence was attributed to strong leadership and a history of high performance. In these three districts, enthusiasm for change was generally high across schools, and teachers and school staff had a "can do" attitude. In contrast, almost all building-level staff as well as several key central administrators in the two remaining districts with historically lower student achievement were far less positive about the reforms and were generally skeptical about the need for standards and assessments. They also strongly questioned how long "this fad" would last.

III. What We Learned About Content and Performance Standards

The most prominent reform initiative being implemented across the states is the implementation of new content and performance standards. Our case studies revealed the following information about how teachers were perceiving these new standards in the five districts.

Major Findings:

Generic vs. Specific
Increased Subject Matter Content
New Instructional Approaches
Finding Instructional Time
Inequities in Implementation

Variations in Level of Specificity

State and local standards vary in terms of how specifically they define what students should know and be able to do. Locally developed standards tended to be more comprehensive and more explicit, resembling curriculum guides with grade specific goals, while state standards were more global goals tied to specific grade levels.

Regardless of the level of specificity, none of the "standards" were considered detailed enough to specify what teachers should be teaching, and every school needed to engage in "aligning" the standards with "their" curriculum. This alignment process was very uneven across schools, with some faculties focusing on rewriting or creating a comprehensive set of goals and instructional strategies at each grade level or within a specific subject matter area, while others simply ordered new textbooks or materials that they felt best matched the standards.

Broadening the Curriculum

Both state and local standards expand the scope of content to be taught. Increased knowledge and skills are reportedly required in every content area addressed in the standards. Teachers, particularly at the upper elementary, middle, and high school levels, noted that they are expected to cover much more material, including concepts and basic skills, during a semester or school year. Math and science teachers most often stressed how the new curricular demands were affecting instruction. The increased expectations left little time for helping students who did not grasp a concept on the first presentation. Teachers believed that the pace of learning has dramatically increased in classrooms; slower learners have less opportunity to review and some teachers feel that they are not teaching as deeply as they did before. Coverage—not mastery—is the goal.

I used to teach three or four concepts a semester, but I taught them well and I could go back and make sure everybody learned the material. Now I have to keep going forward. There's too much material to cover.

—a middle school math teacher

Changing Instruction

Standards are often interdisciplinary and emphasize application rather than rote knowledge. Teachers believe that standards are directly changing the ways they instruct students. They report more "hands-on" learning, more use of projects, more requirements for students to explain the process of arriving at a right answer. Teaching basic facts, memorization, and simple computations or operations were de-emphasized in favor of solving problems or using knowledge to perform "real-life" tasks. Learning through doing was stressed. Several teachers in every district commented that this type of instruction seemed to be better for

students with learning problems because they had more opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge.

The interdisciplinary focus was most evident in the increased emphasis on writing through the curriculum. Students are required to write in every subject matter area, including the arts and physical education. A number of teachers reported that the emphasis on developing writing skills was perhaps the most pervasive and dramatic change in their teaching.

> *I taught elementary school for 30 years and I see changes in the school, but the biggest change by far is how much writing the students do.*
>
> —a retired teacher volunteer

> *We write all the time. We have students keep journals, write how they solved problems, and we grade writing skills in every class.*
>
> —a middle school teacher

Creating More Instructional Time

Four of the five local districts were deeply interested in increasing the efficiency of their schools, particularly through increasing the amount of instructional and professional development time. At some level, all four districts recognized the need to find additional instructional time; districts needed time for those students who required extra reinforcement or support as well as to enrich or challenge the higher performing students. In addition, a consistent challenge was finding sufficient blocks of time for teachers to collaboratively engage in "aligning" the curriculum with new standards or revising or reinventing the organization of that curriculum.

Suburban Doyle County was on a four-track, year-round schedule due to high growth and a desire to increase enrichment and remedial options for students during interim vacations. Rural Hanley County was seeking community approval to permit individual schools to move to a 45/15 day alternative calendar. Watertown has already increased its school year by five days past the state mandated instructional days and was attempting to add still more days. Yet community resistance to both alternative calendars and a longer school year was high.

Block scheduling was also being used to some extent in one or more high schools in all five districts. However, simply extending the instructional period did not necessarily increase efficiency. Only the more perceptive teachers seemed to understand that a 90-minute period would permit them to teach a concept more deeply. A few teachers in each district reported that while they liked it, it was always a challenge to fill the time. All teachers participating in the new block schedule reported that they had little or no professional development or assistance on how to reorient their instruction to match the new time demands.

> *We had a six-period day; now we have four periods. It's very different. You really have to be organized. We try to change activities every 30 minutes. But I think it gives kids a chance to work with us more.*
>
> —a high school teacher

Inequities in Implementing Standards Across Schools

A central purpose of standards is to unify the curriculum across schools as well as school districts. Many of the principals and other central office administrators recognized the importance of focusing schools on the critical curriculum goals and ensuring that all students have access to the same important material. Without a strong and consistent professional support system, however, this curricular unification cannot be realized. Schools varied in how they chose to interpret standards and how they are attempting to align their instruction with those standards. Some schools, operating with the strong curricular guidance of a principal, have organized their professional development resources around aligning their curriculum, which can entail a number of activities such as developing specific instructional units or grade-level instructional objectives, selecting textbooks or other

curricular materials, and reorganizing classrooms or teaching arrangements. Sometimes aligning curriculum means simply defining what is required by the standards and determining whether or not new instructional programs need to be implemented.

> *Schools are all over the map with respect to curriculum. There are a lot of programs going on out there and some principals and staff are better at figuring out which ones are making a difference in getting results.*
>
> —a district superintendent

The variability in school response to organized professional development is an even greater problem for students with disabilities. Special education teachers routinely were "excused" or opted out of professional development that focused on curriculum development or alignment. It was more often the exception than the rule for special educators to actively collaborate with their colleagues in the curriculum alignment activities.

Challenges to Including Students with Disabilities in Standards

Major Findings:

Access to a Balanced Curriculum
Focusing Instruction
Competing Priorities
Increased Collaboration among Teachers
Deciding Who Participates
Determining Modifications and Accommodations

Opinions about how students with disabilities will fare under the new content and performance standards were most often voiced by special education teachers who were actually involved in implementing the new standards, and by curriculum supervisors or administrators. In general, curriculum directors are expecting that most students with disabilities will learn the new content and be assessed on those standards. Directors and teachers expressed few concerns about low incidence students (students with severe cognitive disabilities) because "they will likely require a set of individualized standards." Most concerns centered on students with specific learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, and behavior disorders. Administrators wondered what resources would be required to move beyond the rhetoric of "all" students can learn the new content and ensure that these and other low achieving nondisabled students will actually meet the new standards. However, rarely did teachers or administrators distinguish between the content standards and the knowledge that would be taught and the performance requirement. Curriculum administrators in two districts already see problems surfacing at the secondary level because academic demands are greater and the curriculum is less flexible. These concerns are particularly high in districts that plan to link achieving standards to graduation.

Beyond the overriding doubts about how "all" students will meet the same performance standards, the comments regarding the impacts included the following issues.

Providing Access to a Broad and Balanced Curriculum

When students with disabilities are included in the standards, to whatever degree, special education teachers believe that they are being instructed in a wider variety of subject matter. This seemed particularly true for upper elementary and middle school students and in areas such as math and science. Instructional changes attributed to standards include increased emphasis on content experiments, "authentic" problem solving, and project-based learning. All of these strategies were perceived to support the participation of students with disabilities in the standards and new curricular frameworks.

Focusing Instruction

Standards can create a common language among special and general education teachers. Special educators generally endorsed the need for the centralized framework that standards provided. They wanted goals to help them focus their instruction. One high school special education teacher commented, "I think we're hopeful because [the standards] give us some real concrete direction to work towards with the kids.

And anything that is more clear and more precise than just covering the content in American history will help us." Some teachers also were optimistic that the standards would provide the impetus for setting more challenging learner goals and pushing students beyond the expectations outlined in their IEPs. They were concerned about the varying performance expectations of different teachers and the need for a more unified approach to how an individual student should be educated as well as what is expected of him/her. They were optimistic that standards could provide a unified set of clear expectations across teachers within a school and across grade levels.

Competing Priorities

Despite optimism regarding the impact on curriculum, special education teachers were concerned about how to find instructional time and opportunities to help students with disabilities learn the new content and also gain other important skills that might be more functional or unique to the student. Some teachers were hopeful that certain skills, such as learning strategies, might be incorporated into content instruction, but other non-academic areas are not as easy to integrate. Teachers were concerned about the increased instructional demands placed on students and the lack of adequate time to address all of what a student needs. As one said, "I think we're going to have to be really careful that we don't bypass the students' needs because we have become so focused on the standards [in our instruction]."

Increasing Collaboration Between General and Special Education Teachers

A clear effect of the interdisciplinary nature of standards is the need for teacher collaboration across the content areas. This collaboration was occurring among general educators—for example, between math and language arts teachers or, in one high school, between the math and the vocational/technical education teachers who needed to create authentic tasks for students to demonstrate the use of math skills. Instructional collaboration between general and special educators was also promoted by having common standards. The standards provided a common language for teachers; discussions about individual students centered on whether or how to modify a standard, assessment accommodations, and instructional strategies.

Not surprisingly, this collaboration seemed to be more flexible and routine at the elementary school. Collaboration was least prevalent at the high school level due to factors such as departmentalization of subject matter. However, when all students were expected to meet a set of common standards or had a common set of new graduation requirements, general and special educators at all levels were coming together, though sometimes awkwardly, to make instructional accommodations. Collaboration at the middle and high school levels was facilitated when special educators were regular members of instructional teams or departments.

> *I believe that the standards have made all teachers aware of the need to change and modify instruction and focus more on individual students, and we need to work with special education to help us do that.*
>
> —a third grade teacher

Deciding Who Is "In" the Content and Performance Standards

It was no surprise that teachers and administrators were concerned about how all students were going to be included in a common set of standards. When performance standards were defined as absolute criteria that all students must master (as opposed to goals that students must work toward) teachers were far more uncomfortable. Everyone endorsed the concept that "all" students should show progress and should have higher expectations for their achievements. However, teachers questioned how all students could meet the same level of achievement. General and special education teachers also questioned how one set of content standards could apply to all learners. Despite the perception that standards might in fact lead to improved instructional planning and more focused goal setting for students with disabilities, there are a number of decisions that teachers must make. Perhaps

the most perplexing one for special education teachers was determining when and how to "modify" a specific content standard. Many of these teachers frequently refer to a student's reading level as an indication that he or she could not be expected to learn the same content. Special education teachers in their individualized planning did not often address critical core concepts or "big ideas" from the curriculum.

> *I always feel a dilemma, and I know some of my colleagues do too. For instance—math. I can give [the students] an equation, and they can just plug it into the calculator, but they wouldn't know what they were doing. So I'm always struggling with the question, do I do the pre-algebra little simple equations with the calculator or do I really teach them what they need to know when they go out in the world? I mean like money, counting, and just functional things. And more and more I'm finding a wider discrepancy between what the curriculum says and what they know.*
>
> —a junior high school special educator

The demands to hold "all" students to the new and rigorous academic content and performance standards created a need for more intensive instruction—specifically reteaching or reinforcing concepts—for many students with disabilities as well as low-achieving students. Teachers began to explore how to regroup students to provide opportunities for extra teaching. Some special education teachers felt they needed "pull-out" programs and other homogeneous groups which, in their opinion, were not truly inclusive. The question for them was, is it more important for the students to be in truly heterogeneous instructional groups or to master the concepts or knowledge specified by the new standards and assessments?

Determining Modifications and Accommodations

Related to the issue of determining whether a content standard was relevant or appropriate for a student is the process of determining when a standard should be modified versus what instructional or assessment accommodations are necessary. As cited above, "modification" refers to a change in content or performance expectations. For example, a student may be given a lower-level text or a reduced assignment. "Accommodation" assumes students with disabilities will master the material without a change in level of content; however, instruction and assessment may require such things as some extra time or use of tools such as word processors or calculators. In practice, educators frequently limited modifications to assigning fewer pages to read or giving fewer questions to answer. Rather than considering how best to accomplish underlying learning goals, teachers simply looked for ways that students with disabilities could do particular assignments. The issue of cognitive demands or conceptual difficulties versus simply the length of an assignment or the reading level was generally not apparent to any of the special education teachers.

Modifying a standard also posed a number of challenges. One concern was who decides to modify and if the modification is appropriately challenging.

> *One of the things that we've been thinking about is how the decision whether to modify a standard or to accommodate a standard is going to be made. Those are pretty subjective opinions—who needs a modification, who needs an accommodation. And if so, what kind and how much?*
>
> —a special education administrator

The results of modifying standards could easily be lowered expectations and haphazard performance goals for students under the guise of full participation in standards.

> *I think one of the more troubling things for me as a special educator is to say that we're doing the same thing as regular education, but with modifications. What does that mean?*
>
> —a middle school special education teacher

IV. What We Learned About Holding Schools Accountable for Student Learning

Assessments and increased accountability for student achievement are among the most visible and controversial reform initiatives being implemented within the five local case study districts.

Major Findings:

Assessment Anxiety
Understanding Test Data
Implementing Authentic Assessments

Assessment Anxiety in the Schools

The focus on new assessments and the reporting of student scores has increased anxiety among all school staff. Building principals are particularly concerned about the consequences of low scores, and they almost uniformly criticized one or more aspects of the district and/or state assessment program. This was clearly more evident in the two districts that had already implemented high-stakes state assessments. Teachers were also anxious, although more often supportive, of the need to have more accountability for what students are learning. Both teachers and principals were concerned about how many students would ultimately be able to meet the performance standards. Principals frequently commented that specific groups of students or specific grade levels were not as "ready" to take the new assessments as other students.

Teachers did feel that they could move most students to the same higher level of achievement, but were adamant that "some" students would just not meet the standards. Both general and special educators were concerned that the new accountability system was not sensitive to student differences. For some principals, the lack of improvement on assessments was frustrating and reaffirmed to them the futility of attempting to link accountability to student test scores. They believed that they "had done everything they could" to improve performance.

> *I think most of the anxiety came over the fact that we were going to be measured as a school. Not that the students would not [improve] or that we wouldn't figure out a way to move the students towards what needs to be done, but could we do it fast enough? Could we boost enough of them out of [the lowest] category into [higher performance levels] to keep the school out of trouble?*
>
> —a high school teacher

Understanding the Purpose and Interpreting the Use of Assessment Data

Often, teachers and principals were very unclear about what might be required to improve test scores. Understanding of the purpose and limitations of the assessments varied among teachers and some principals. For example, most school staff focused on the higher stakes assessments—those tests whose scores are reported—and they were teaching to these tests. They often did not recognize the need for multiple sources of student data, particularly for instructional planning. Some schools spent much time having students practice the assessments. However, other schools identified key subject matter areas (e.g., writing, math, etc.) where test scores were low and had many students practice on those types of problems or tasks.

Efforts to improve test scores could be isolated from the overall curriculum goals in some schools. In fact, all school principals and teachers expressed concerns about how assessments would limit what teachers taught. Some teachers in Hanley County, Watertown, and Doyle County felt that their schools only focused on the subject matter being tested and ignored other important areas of the curriculum. Across all of the districts, only a handful of teachers and principals clearly stated that in order to improve

their students' test results, they would have to re-examine what they were teaching and how teachers planned instruction.

Time and Effort Required to Engage in More "Authentic" Assessments

Some teachers and administrators in Watertown, Doyle, and Hanley Counties felt overwhelmed by demands to develop portfolios or construct teacher-made performance assessments. Often the teacher-made assessments were designed to assess more complex interdisciplinary tasks that required students to apply knowledge or solve problems. These assessments were not easy to construct or grade. Managing student portfolios was also a real challenge to all teachers. Despite the belief that the process of creating assessments helps teachers better understand what and how to teach, many of the central office administrators in districts involved in this process questioned the time demands on teachers.

> *We've had to designate a room to share the cumulative portfolios. Teachers are looking at how to organize and select the work. Sometimes just managing the process becomes the goal and the teacher student interaction gets lost.*
>
> —a high school administrator

Challenges to Including Students with Disabilities in Accountability

Students with disabilities are impacted by all of the issues surrounding the implementation of new high stakes assessments. There are also some issues unique to these students.

Major Findings:

Deciding Who Participates
Unsystematic Accommodations
Changing What is Taught
Inclusion in Assessment as the End Not the Means

Deciding Who Should Participate in the Assessments

A major issue for teachers and principals with mandated assessments is deciding which students with disabilities should participate in the assessments. With the exception of Hanley County, all four districts permit students with disabilities to be exempted from state or local assessments through an IEP decision. Teachers and principals in these four districts were far more skeptical about including students with disabilities in the assessments as compared to including them in the "standards." Some teachers and principals were hopeful that content standards could result in higher expectations and more access to the curriculum. However, they viewed participation in assessments, by and large, as punishing to the students and potentially damaging to schools. Despite these concerns, all those interviewed knew that they were under pressure to include as many students with disabilities as possible in the assessments. This pressure included limits from two states on how many students could be exempted from assessment.[1]

Pressure was intensive when assessments were linked to high school graduation. Administrators in Doyle County reported that they had increasing numbers of parents of children with learning difficulties, particularly those diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, seeking written Section 504 accommodation plans that would permit their child to have assessment accommodations. The hope was that the accommodations might increase student performance on the assessment.

Decisions to exempt a student with a disability from assessments were reported to be most often influenced by the current academic achievement of a student. For example, if a student's reading and/or math achievement was two or more grades below expected, teachers assumed that the general assessment would be inappropriate and that the student should not participate. A common response to

[1] Research in this area was conducted prior to implementation of the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requiring students with disabilities to be included in all state and district-wide assessments. Beginning July 1, 1998, states must report how well students with disabilities are performing on regular assessments and, by July 1, 2000, how well they perform on alternative assessments.

including students in the assessment was, "It's not fair to subject them to something we know they can't do. We already know the student doesn't read well. What are we doing to the student?"

Concerns about damaging students' self-esteem were often expressed by teachers, but so were concerns about bringing down a school's scores, as well as a reluctance on the part of some staff to be accountable for students with such diverse learning needs. One Watertown principal noted that his teachers have been receptive to inclusion; however, he added, "When you bring that accountability piece into inclusive classes, teachers all say, 'Accountable to what degree and for whom?'"

Unsystematic Modifications or Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

All districts offered the opportunity for IEP teams to provide assessment accommodations; in several districts, assessment tasks could be "modified" to reduce the demands of the task or even alter the actual concepts or knowledge being measured. Accommodations were considered essential for all students with disabilities in order for them to participate in assessments.

> *It's amazing how much knowledge [special education students] do have, and it really wouldn't have been reflected if they had not had the help [to participate in the assessment].*
>
> —a general education middle school teacher

Special education teachers firmly believed that accommodations were critical to "even the playing field" and to include more students in the assessment process. Teacher concerns were centered around the welfare of a student and a desire to provide as much support as possible throughout the testing situation, which could be a new experience for students with disabilities. Principals hoped that accommodations would raise the students' scores. Four districts had guidelines or policies specifying which accommodations could be used and that the accommodations had to have been used during instruction. However, across all of the districts there was little guidance or accountability for how IEP teams or teachers decided which accommodations a student received. Nor did anyone check to see if the accommodations were, indeed, part of instruction or even needed during assessment.

Because teachers and principals had varied understanding of assessments as well as some wariness about the usefulness of large-scale assessments with students with disabilities, accommodations were frequently guided by the desire to help the student do as well as possible on the test or to just participate in the testing event. The notion that it might be important to have a *valid* indication of where a student with a disability is achieving relative to other students was not a particularly important goal. Teachers may have considered any comparison to a norm to be, as one said, "Just plain silly." To most teachers, and many principals, accommodations became a way to help students get the highest score possible. No one questioned whether a high score was meaningful to a teacher or student, or if it would change expectations and programs.

> *I had a real problem with [accommodations] at first. My question was, are we assessing how well a child can read or how the child can understand what is said to him? Then it was explained how this accommodation would only be used in some assessments and that it's important to know what the child knows. I'm okay with it now, but I still am not sure it's giving us a true picture of how a child uses printed information.*
>
> —a special education teacher talking about reading a test to a child with a disability

Changing What Special Education Students Are Taught

Inclusion in assessments was seen as driving changes in special education instruction faster than merely assuming the student would participate in the standards. Instructional changes were sometimes as unsystematic as the accommodations provided during assessments and often fragmented from the IEP. Teachers reported teaching IEP goals and then teaching the specific skills or items from the test.

Before, I used to teach to the IEP. Now that my students are taking the [state assessments], the principal wants them to be in the language arts block. So I went down to the second grade and got their textbook and now that's what I teach.

—a fourth grade special education teacher

Sometimes inclusion in the assessment, like inclusion in the standards, translated into increased instructional inclusion in general education classrooms and increased collaboration among teachers. Sometimes, students with disabilities simply practiced how to take the assessments.

Yet some special education teachers believed that including students with disabilities in the assessments helped raise expectations for these students.

I think initially all of our teachers feared that these [assessments and accountability] were going to make it harder for the special education student. However, I think we're doing more mainstreaming now. We have more collaborative classes. I think more instruction incorporates the special education students as a group member.

—an elementary school special education teacher

Success breeds success! We've had some students [with disabilities] score way above what we expected. This experience really tore down the barriers to inclusion in the school.

—an elementary school special education teacher

Inclusion in Assessment as the End, Not the Means

For many educators, the goal has become to include as many students as possible in the state or district assessments. The rationale for this goal or what should be achieved through this inclusion is rarely discussed. Some special and general education teachers, particularly in districts that had yet to fully implement their assessment, had different opinions regarding inclusion in standards versus inclusion in assessments. The former was perceived as potentially a good thing for students with disabilities, while assessments were seen as potentially harmful or at best a waste of time. Teachers and other administrators knew that participating in assessments was important and they would make whatever accommodations were necessary to get a maximum number of students in the assessment. But often this came without the link to making those assessments inform programs for students with disabilities.

These perceptions are due in part to a general lack of understanding of the purposes of assessment, particularly in terms of public accountability versus program improvement. If teachers could see the relationship between the assessment and what they did with an individual student with a disability (which was more obvious in districts like Watertown and Hanley County, which had performance assessments closely linked to local curriculum), then the usefulness of assessments was perceived to be greater.

Our teachers are pretty comfortable now with including students with disabilities in our state assessments [for school accountability]. But now the state is talking about a high school graduation assessment and that brings up questions for students with disabilities.

—a Hanley County administrator

Ensuring that the maximum number of students with disabilities participates in standards and assessments, at whatever levels, was important to many special educators. However, as some were discovering, participation was not synonymous with inclusion in instructional settings. For students with high incidence disabilities, participation in assessments did mean that students were instructed with more challenging material and often a faster pace. When the academic expectations increased, so too did the need for more support and reinforcement. This, in turn, could mean more small group work or other specialized attention. Some teachers were concerned that academic needs would supersede the need for truly heterogeneous and inclusive education.

V. What We Learned About Changing School Governance

All five districts were trying to provide more flexibility and autonomy to their local schools. Four of the five districts had instituted some form of site-based management (SBM) in the local schools over the past decade. In general, special education programs are often ignored by SBM teams. Reasons for this include the highly regulated nature of special education programs as well as fears on the part of principals that they might make an illegal decision. However, each of the five case study schools experienced certain challenges to implementing more localized governance processes.

Major Findings:

Varied Input
Time and Energy Demands
Inequities Across Schools

Varied Teacher, Parent, and Community Input

Individual districts and schools varied in terms of how much they valued parent and community input. In Doyle County, for example, parents and community members participated in school decisions at all levels, including central office. There were many opportunities for structured input and validation of decisions. In Bannister, parents were encouraged, but meeting times were often inconvenient and team discussions were almost always led by principals and focused on specific school topics. As a result, few parents participated.

I work with the district on its planning committee. I'm on the shared decision-making committee at the school and several others. If we parents don't get involved, we have ourselves to blame.

—a parent

Teachers across all districts felt that their opinions or input on site-based governance councils were more or less optional, depending on their building principal. Some teachers in every district indicated that at one time or another they had participated in making a group decision that was totally ignored by a principal, without explanation or justification. They expressed frustration with the process of site-based management and the time involved because so much of the ultimate decisionmaking still remained in the hands of building principals.

Time and Energy Demands

Teachers were very concerned about the amount of time they had available for SBM tasks. Many of the schools had a school council or other decision-making team as well as a variety of committees or sub-groups working on specific issues. Principals viewed these groups as essential to getting many teachers involved and getting tasks—such as collecting or analyzing information—done. Teachers saw these groups as time consuming. This was particularly true if principals ignored or down played teachers' decisions. Also, if the decisions were complex or uncomfortable, such as those concerning staff appointments, teachers felt inadequately prepared. A challenge inherent to SBM is balancing shared decisionmaking with the time necessary to enable everyone to participate in an informed and meaningful manner.

After two years of [budgeting], the staff decided that we needed a budget committee. The committee would do the budget, and the staff and I would review it. And that's where we are now. We didn't have anybody sign up for the budget committee [this year].

—a Morgan River principal

Increased Inequities Across Schools

Central office administrators in districts that had implemented SBM some years ago acknowledged that the freedom given to schools may have contributed to a lack of focus among schools. Schools began implementing and using a wide variety of programs, textbooks, and materials, and school committees began to change how they organized classes and the curriculum, including implementing multi-age, multi-ability classrooms, co-teaching, and other initiatives. In all five districts, individual school autonomy, combined with individual teacher prerogative, resulted in loosely coupled and fragmented instructional systems. Central office administrators welcomed standards as an opportunity to bring focus to schools and provide some continuity across schools. Yet the most autonomous schools posed major problems to central office administrators, who were now faced with implementing a common agenda.

According to many of the central administrators, their biggest challenge in terms of implementing a common agenda throughout the district was lack of control over the professional development resources in the schools. The most critical was control over teacher time. With districts having only a limited number of district-wide professional development days, central office administrators had to encourage, cajole or otherwise prod schools to use their time and money to support implementation of standards and/or assessments. As a result, in schools that chose to focus on new standards and assessments, entire schools or grade levels set about the task of reviewing and improving curriculum, materials, and instruction. Other schools continued to offer a variety of activities or episodic professional development "events" on diverse topics and viewed the standards and assessments as simply one more program or initiative. Ultimately, these schools may well join in a total school focus on standards and curriculum reform, but at the time of this study, administrators saw greater inequities across schools in terms of opportunity to learn new content.

Impact of Site-Based Management on Students with Disabilities

Local site-based decisionmaking posed challenges to district special education directors concerned about compliance issues as well as program integrity. Directors had to permit variation across schools in how programs were organized and staff were utilized. However, the extent to which a school staff engaged in decisionmaking about special education was directly related to having either a principal with knowledge and interest in these programs and/or an active parent of a child with a disability.

Major Findings:

Lack of Knowledge and Representation
Central vs. Local Decisionmaking

Lack of Knowledge and Representation

Site-based teams rarely had special educators or parents of students with disabilities represented. Further, the teams generally made few decisions about special education programs. Often team representatives said that there simply had never been a special education issue brought to the team. There was a general perception that special education was a very rigid and heavily prescribed program and that schools had little authority over how the program should be conducted. Central office administrators did not necessarily encourage local school sites to make decisions regarding students with disabilities. There were some notable exceptions, particularly in one elementary school in Hanley County.

> *We've [special education teachers] had a lot of opportunities for input. Personally, I've been on three committees – on block scheduling, budget, and four-period day – and now [the school] is calling for another committee on discipline. But basically in special education we're left alone – SBM hasn't had a big impact.*
>
> —a high school special education teacher

Central vs. Local Site Decisionmaking

Most local special education directors recognized the limits of their authority over schools and saw themselves as facilitators and resources providers. In some cases they performed as "watchdogs," making sure that schools were not doing things that would violate the rights of a child with a disability. As a result, special education programs were allowed to evolve within each school, resulting in great variability in programs across schools. This variability was more often the result of individual teacher decisions than the product of well thought out decisions on the part of site-based councils. In fact, across all five districts there was only one example of a site team making a decision that directly affected special education: that was to cluster all students with disabilities in certain classes to facilitate teacher collaboration and inclusion.

Local special education directors generally were frustrated by their lack of control over teacher professional development time within the schools, because they considered such development to be the only way—other than personal persuasion—to affect changes in special education practice in inclusive classrooms.

The resulting variability in program models, particularly the opportunities for inclusion, concerned local special education directors. Yet they did not feel empowered to change practice and almost uniformly said that they relied on individual parents to seek changes within a school.

VI. Conclusion

A major question raised, but not answered, by this research is whether or not standards-based reform is working for students with disabilities. The findings from the case studies suggest that there are both positive aspects as well as challenges. Indeed, our findings identified a number of issues for general as well as special educators. Much depends on how the reforms are defined and implemented. What are the standards? How will student performance be measured and represented? Who will be held accountable? However, with respect to students with disabilities, our research points to three issues that need to be considered:

1) There needs to be a consistent decision-making process outlining who should make decisions about how to include students with disabilities in standards and assessments, including modify standards. What constitutes modification versus accommodations?

2) There need to be consistent guidelines with teacher and family input for making these decisions and for public accountability for these decisions. Current policies calling for common standards for all students need to be examined and interpreted for building staff and parents of students with disabilities. Teachers and parents need to know how to prioritize individual educational goals and understand the consequences of their decisions.

3) Teachers of students with disabilities must be made aware of the essential connection between standards, assessment, and accountability and the daily content and structure of their instruction. Implementing new reforms without a sound understanding of these three elements leads to disjointed efforts and ineffective use of resources. Instead of perceiving that they must "do one more thing," special (and general) educators must rethink their instructional practices to better integrate demands of standards and assessments with the individual educational plans of their students.

There will be trade-offs in this process. Special education teachers, along with parents, will need to more carefully consider what to teach and which knowledge and skills are more important than others. Increased knowledge demands and time constraints require even more careful goal setting. Teachers will need to balance individualization of student programs, as well as their own practices, with demands that all students achieve at some level of common content standards. Finally, inclusion as defined by common settings will be challenged by the rigor of new academic standards. Assisting all students acquire the new knowledge in inclusive settings will require greater innovation and creativity among teachers and principals.

Despite these challenges, the overall tone of the teacher and administrator interviews was positive. Educators believe that standards will mean opportunity to learn more challenging and important subject matter and higher levels of achievement for all students. Everyone realizes that standards-based reform is a new way of thinking about education. It may even be more unique for students with disabilities. Making this goal a reality that works for students with disabilities will require the commitment of valuable instructional time and other resources. It will also require knowledge of the purpose of the reforms as well as how to implement them. Teachers, administrators, parents, and students all need to be part of this effort.

> *I believe in all of our kids. I believe in what they can give this country. I'm looking out for my son's needs and I want certain things to happen in his life. But I also know that in order for him to be successful, other children need to be successful too. We're all in this together.*
>
> —the parent of a child with a disability

CENTER
FOR
POLICY
RESEARCH

The ***Center for Policy Research on the Impact of General and Special Education Reform*** (Center) is a national, three-year project initiated in October 1994 by the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), the Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth at the University of Maryland (UM), and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) at the University of Pennsylvania. The Center's mission is to examine general and special education reforms, their interaction and their implications for students with disabilities, and ultimately to determine options for policymakers at federal, state and local levels.

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